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ABSTRACT

There is indeed a literacy crisis, but this crisis needs to be reconceived as a crisis in definition. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo's book "Literacy: Reading the Word and the World" can be used to refute E. D. Hirsch's arguments as presented in his "Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know," but this kind of response results in the expenditure of valuable institutional time and space on comparatively inessential questions. The crisis is not that students are somehow suddenly inferior or that the curriculum is somehow suddenly debauched, but that the dominant definition of literacy and the pedagogy that accompanies that definition imagine reading to be only an act of consumption, of taking in information. The literacy crisis is that the current definition of literacy and the pedagogy that drives this definition do not consider reading and writing as acts of production as well as consumption, as acts of making meaning as well as taking in meaning. What the pedagogy that promotes a definition of literacy as the production and consumption of text would look like in the classroom is illustrated by a student paper and a class discussion of an assigned essay. (A figure is attached.) (RS)

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# TEACHING FREIRE AND TESTING HIRSCH: BRINGING LITERACY INTO THE CLASSROOM

In 1987, E.D. Hirsch and Paulo Freire both published books on literacy. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know immediately became the center of a storm of controversy, as we all know, with its declaration of a Cultural Literacy Crisis and its call for the establishment of a core curriculum to reform the current dismal state of the American educational system. Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo argue in Literacy: Reading the Word and the World, however, that this kind of educational reform, which restricts itself to the material covered in the classroom, actually serves to perpetuate and extend the very crisis it ostensibly seeks to resolve. So far, Hirsch's call for reform has received much more attention from both the public and the academy than Freire and Macedo's call for a radical redefinition of literacy and a radical restructuring of the educational environment.

Initially I wanted to use Freire and Macedo's work to refute Hirsch's argument, but I have since come to see that this kind of response to Hirsch results in the expenditure of valuable institutional time and space on comparatively inessential questions. The current battle between Hirsch and Robert Scholes over whether or not Hirsch uses his sources responsibily, which has spread from the pages of College English to the MLA's Profession 88 and from there to the MLA Spring Newsletter illustrates this point

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perfectly. Thus, rather than use Freire and Macedo to fire another series of salvoes into an argument that just won't sink, I am going to use this occasion to address what I feel are the fundamental questions that Hirsch's work raises for me as a teacher, questions that were initially suggested to me by Freire and Macedo's concern for how literacy is defined and how the educational environment is constructed. I would like, then, to explore the following questions: What does Hirsch mean by literacy? What does Hirsch mean when he says there is a literacy crisis? How do I, as a teacher who is dissatisfied with Hirsch's responses, answer these questions myself? And finally, how do I then create a classroom that enacts my understanding of literate behavior?

Hirsch's Back to Basics movement arises from a nostalgia for a past when another, purer literacy reigned, a past that Daniel and Lauren Resnick's research into the history of literacy criteria suggests never existed. They state in "The Nature of Literacy" that

> It is only during the present century that the goal of reading for the purpose of gaining information has been applied in ordinary elementary schools to the entire population of students. Today, the term "functional literacy" has come to mean the ability to read common texts such as newspapers and manuals and to use the information gained, usually to secure employment...[T]his mass-literacy criterion is stronger than that of any earlier period of history (Resnick 200).

While the Resnick's research does away with Hirsch's Golden Age, when casual references to Shakespeare were readily understood, it also helps us to see that Hirsch's work is grounded in this definition of literacy as reading for information. Hirsch, in

fact, declares his Cultural Literacy Crisis because students today lack the background information to be good readers for information. With the crisis thus understood, the way to produce literate behavior is to provide the students with the information they are lacking, information contained by the Cultural Literacy List.

The Resnick's argument does not mean, of course, that it is impossible to declare a literacy crisis; it simply means that the historicized view of literacy prohibits defining the crisis as the loss of some finer understanding of literacy in the past. The Resnicks go on to point out in the conclusion to their essay that, while new definitions of literacy may arise in the future, the "forms of pedagogy will almost surely have to change to accomodate the changes in both the literacy criterion and target population" (Resnick 202). I would state the Resnicks' argument even more emphatically: new definitions of literacy must be accompanied by new forms of pedagogy. This explains why the work of educators as diverse as Hirsch, Robert Pattison and Robert Scholes, ~~fails~~ HAS FAILED to make a dent in the literacy crisis: all of their imaginative reconceptions of literacy, the teacher, the student, the classroom, and the university amount to nothing without a pedagogy to foster the newly defined literate behavior.

The question becomes then, what would the pedagogy look like that sought to promote a definition of literacy ~~as~~ other than reading for information? What would a pedagogy look like that started with a definition of literacy as both the consumption and production of texts? How would the classroom change? I would like

to use a student paper and a class discussion prompted by Clifford Geertz's Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight as the sites for exploring how these questions are responded to in my classroom. The work that I will discuss here occurred in the tenth week of a ~~General Writing~~ FRESHMAN COMPOSITION course I taught last semester. The class was composed primarily of first-year students and the reading and writing assignments came from the textbook Ways of Reading.

Jared chose to respond to the assignment which asked him to "prepare a Geertzian reading of some part of our culture that you know well" by writing an essay on how our culture reads and writes. His essay, which was written before any class discussion of Geertz's essay had taken place, begins by trying to figure out why Geertz writes the way he does. In the process of struggling with this question, Jared moves towards a definition of reading that might include the production as well as the consumption of the text. Jared writes:

> In taking the approach that he does, Geertz exposes himself to a potentially crippling problem. Some readers, doubtless, when faced with the somewhat unusual subject matter, would tell themselves, as I did after my first reading, that Geertz was clearly insane to write about chickens stabbing each other to death. But, in my despondence, an idea came to me. What if, I asked myself, that general reaction (only less negative) was exactly what Geertz intended? This is what saved me. The realization, not that Geertz was far more subtle than I had realized, but rather in what manner he was subtle was the important part of reading his essay. As I have said, by using an unusual subject to illustrate human nature, Geertz is forcing the reader to think about why he wrote what we did. He is, essentially, including the reader in the creative process of writing the essay. In this sense, the essay is unfinished until it is read, for the important part of the essay lies, not with what it says, but rather with how it says it and what it doesn't say.

By asking questions about how the essay is written and what it doesn't say, Jared is demanding more from the essay than information: he is demanding that the essay respond to his questions. The writing that is produced by this kind of reading is not a report on what Geertz says, nor is it merely a commentary on Geertz's argument. Jared takes on the responsibility here of speaking with a text, of engaging it in a dialogue, a project which leads him to see himself as participating in the production of Geertz's text. The problem for me as a teacher is how to help him and the rest of the class make this move: how do I set up a class discussion that will explore and exploit these assertions that "reading is a creative process" and "an essay is unfinished until it is read." How can I set up a class discussion that enacts these statements as principles rather than invokes them as slogans?

One provisional step I made in this direction was to begin a class discussion on Geertz's essay with the following handout:

On Monday, Juliana noted that in "Feathers, Blood, Crowds, and Money," we as readers are in a position unlike any we've assumed previously in the essay. She said (as I remember it), something like this, "Up till this section in Geertz's essay, we can only agree with him. After all, what do we know about Bali? But in this section Geertz is interpreting the work that he has presented and this is something we all have in common. It is at this point in the essay that we can disagree with him."

Taking Juliana's cue, I would like to spend this class looking at Geertz's interpretation of the cockfight as an art form in order to determine whether or not we agree with him. To begin this discussion, I would like you to read the paragraph on 322 which begins, "As any art form...," and then to write in your own words what you think Geertz's definition of an art form is. You will have a total of ten minutes to complete this assignment.

The paragraph I ask them to read states:

As any art form--for that, finally, is what we are dealing with--the cockfight renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced (or, if you prefer, raised) to the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived. The cockfight is "really real" only to the cocks--it does not kill anyone, castrate anyone, reduce anyone to animal status, alter the heirarchical relations among people, nor refashion the heirarchy; it does not even redistribute income in any significant way. What it does is what, for other peoples with other temperaments and other conventions, Lear and Crime and Punishment do; it catches up these themes--death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss, beneficence, chance--and, ordering them into an encompassing structure, presents them in such a way as to throw into relief a particular view of their essential nature. It puts a construction on them, makes them, to those historically positioned to appreciate the construction, meaningful--visible, tangible, graspable--"real" in an ideational sense.

Recall, now, that the students have been asked to state in their own words what they think Geertz's definition of art is in this paragraph. For the next thirty minutes, the class and I work together filling three chalkboards to construct a definition that we feel accurately captures Geertz's position in the excerpt. As you can see in the second handout, which is a reproduction of a student's notes, the middle chalkboard, where I started recording a number of students' responses, says, "Art is a means of symbolic expression. It takes out aggression. Men feel these things/themes: Death, Masculinity, Rage, Pride, etc." On the chalkboard to the left, I placed those comments having to do with the part of the cockfight that is "really real." As you can see from the handout, the students interpreted "really real" to mean "real in the body." On the right is the students' attempt to grapple with what Geertz might mean by "the real." At this point in the discussion, all the chalkboard says is, "Real--what's behind the chicken."

My students are stuck at this point. They have their initial

responses mapped on to the chalkboard, the kind of fragmentary acts of production that happen in any classroom, and they don't know what to do next. Where they go at this point will determine what definition of literacy is working in my classroom: are we reading for information or are we producing a reading? That is, confronted with a reading problem, can the class turn to me to produce the final coherent reading which they can then consume as information or must they produce their own reading out of the work they've produced so far.

I say to the class, "We need to come back to the passage and appropriate his language--see if his language can help us get a handle on this opposition." I do this so that we can get a sense of what's going on between the "really real" and the "real," (what's the difference? how and why does art move from the really real to the real?). Debi, who has been silent throughout this discussion, suddenly says, "For the people who watch the cockfight, what they experience is emotional, temporary, not physical." I ask her, "What does Geertz call this 'emotional,' 'temporary' experience?" Michele answers, "I don't know what this word means, but he says that it's 'real' in the ideational sense." I write ideational on the board. "Now what's in the word?" "Idea," Michele says. "Geertz means that the cockfight is real in the audience's mind."

I could close the class by tying up all the chaos on the board into a nice, manageable articulation of Geertz's definition of art; the decision I make is determined by what I think I am teaching--am I teaching them what to think about Geertz or am I

teaching them how to produce a reading rather than consume one? I ask my students to spend five minutes writing and thinking about the question I put to them: "All right, now if this is what Geertz thinks art is (this being the three chalkboards littered with the comments from our discussion), what are the assumptions that underlie this definition." In effect, I am asking my students to move beyond the meaning we have constructed to question the construction itself.

If you'll return to the bottom of the second page of the handout, you can see what happened. At the end of five minutes, I say, "O.K., what are the assumptions?" From their writing, they read the following:

Lisa: "He's assuming art only has a psychological effect on people, not a physical effect."

Matt: "He's assuming that you can remove the practical consequences."

Martin: "Geertz thinks art is never trivial. Art always deals with these important themes. It's never something else."

Michele: "Is Geertz assuming that these grand themes are only experienced in roosters and not also in their owners?"

Mike: "I think that he's assuming that there's a real world and an abstract world."

I list these responses on the board but, with ten minutes left, I I have to choose which one I think might prove to be most useful to us in our work as students of reading and writing. I don't have time to decide which one of these responses is going to do this for me though: I have to guess, and I guess the assumption that "Art always deals with grand themes" will be the most fruitful.

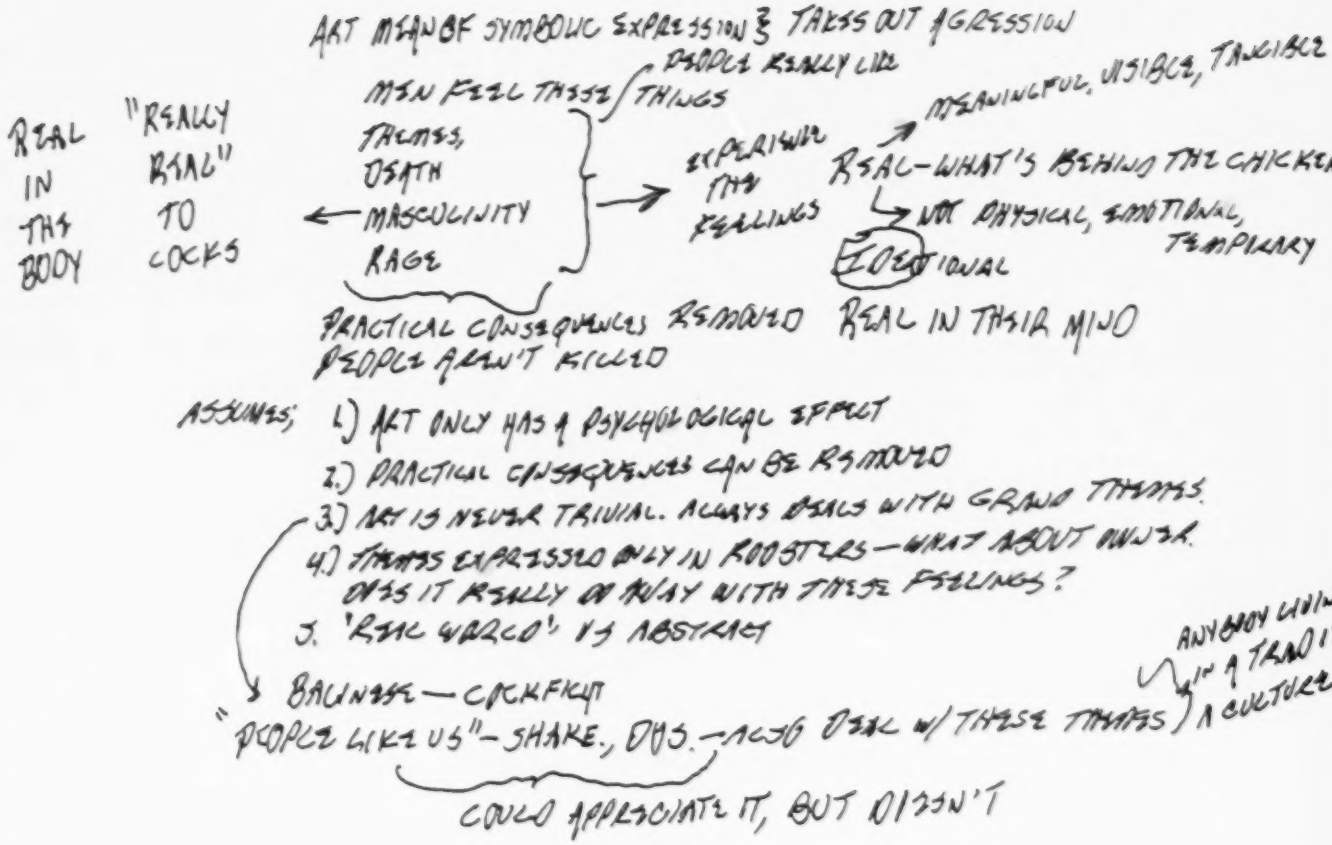
I ask a question that emerges from what the students have said. "What art in Bali expresses these grand themes? What art in

our culture does this?" Using Geertz's terms, we set up the following proportion: the cockfight is to the Balinese as Shakespeare and Dostoevski are to....but we don't know how to complete the proportion. In response to my question, "Who are the people Geertz is talking about here? Who are those 'historically positioned to appreciate' Shakespeare and Dostoevski?" Pam says, "Peope like us." Martin qualifies this, saying, "Anybody living in our tradition could appreciate these authors, but that doesn't mean that we all do. I'm sure there are people in Bali who think cockfights are trivial and stupid." As the class ends, I say, "Well, we're going to have to continue this discussion on Friday. We will want to spend some time thinking about what Pam's phrase 'people like us' means given Geertz's examples. We will need to talk some more about who he imagines himself talking to."

The class discussion and the student paper that I have put before you represent my effort to get the students to imagine literacy not as the act of talking <u>about</u> something, but as the act of talking <u>to</u> something. I would argue that my students are enacting a definition of literacy that sees reading and writing as acts of production that they participate in. The words that they produce in response to this demand, those jotted in their journals but never handed in, those spoken in class, those written on the chalkboard and erased fifty minutes later, and those preserved in their essays, provide an alternative response to Hirsch's definition of literacy as reading for information. Class discussion begins with production rather than consumption: the students produce a reading of Geertz's words rather than

consume mine. The rest of the class is controlled, to a very large extent, by their responses: their readings are recorded on the board and are subject to discussion, evaluation, and revision. The text that they produce in the class thus becomes the text we study: our work in the class is to produce a reading and then to produce a critique of the reading we have produced.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that there is indeed a literacy crisis, but that this crisis needs to be reconceived as a crisis in definition: the crisis is not that our students are somehow suddenly inferior or that our curriculum is somehow suddenly debauched, but that the dominant definition of literacy and the pedagogy that accompanies that definition only imagine reading to be an act of consumption, only to be the taking in of information. Any writing the students do within this system of education strives to mirror the function of reading: the writing seeks to re-transmit the information the students have taken in. Thus, the literacy crisis is that our current definition of literacy and the pedagogy that drives this definition do not consider reading and writing as acts of production as well as acts of consumption, as acts of making meaning as well as acts of taking in meaning. In short, the real literacy crisis occurs whenever we deploy a pedagogy that asks our students only to consume texts and not to produce them as well.


ART MEANS OF SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION & TAKES OUT AGGRESSION
REAL IN THE BODY
"REALLY REAL" TO COCKS
MEN FEEL THESE THINGS
PEOPLE REALLY LIKE
TRUTH, DEATH, MASCULINITY, RAGE
EXPERIENCE THE FEELINGS
REAL - WHAT'S BEHIND THE CHICKEN
MEANINGFUL, VISIBLE, TANGIBLE
NOT PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, TEMPORARY
EMOTIONAL
PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES REMOVED
PEOPLE AREN'T KILLED
REAL IN THEIR MIND
ASSUMES; 1.) ART ONLY HAS A PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECT
2.) PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES CAN BE REMOVED
3.) ART IS NEVER TRIVIAL. ALWAYS DEALS WITH GRAND THEMES.
4.) THEMES EXPRESSED ONLY IN ROOSTERS — WHAT ABOUT OWLS. DOES IT REALLY DO AWAY WITH THESE FEELINGS?
5. 'REAL WORLD' VS ABSTRACT
BALINESE — COCKFIGHT
"PEOPLE LIKE US" — SHAKES., DOS. — ACTS DEAL W/ THESE THEMES
ANYBODY LIVING IN A TRADITIONAL CULTURE
COULD APPRECIATE IT, BUT DOESN'T